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ABSTRACT

Although alleged sexist implications surrounding the generic use of the term "man" have led many to advocate the elimination of the term from usage, it cannot be concluded that the use of the term as generic is always sexist. A review of the studies dealing with the use of the term shows that it has not been empirically established that the word "man" is responsible for causing people to think "male." Problems associated with this word stem primarily from its misuse in context rather than from any inherent sexism in the word itself. Lingering sexist associations which have accumulated around the proper generic use of the term can best be eliminated by a policy that insists on careful, discreet, and precise use of the term. Its usage should be permitted in contexts in which speakers use the word or its compounds in passages that make explicit the fact that the term refers to males and females generically. If the word can be said to function generically in some contexts when used properly, there is no need for neologisms to replace the word nor for seeking alternatives. (DF)

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Peter Scholl

April 1, 1979

GENERIC MAN: SEXIST LANGUAGE OR ACCEPTABLE USAGE?

I assume that everyone attending this convention received the mailing titled "Non-Sexist Language and CCC Conventions," which noted that a resolution had been passed to the effect that at this convention we are all urged "to avoid sexist use of English, such as 'Madame Chairman' to address a presiding woman," and that the provisions of the NCTE Guidelines for Non-Sexist Uses of English should be followed. I am in agreement with the spirit, if not with the letter, of all of those guidelines. For I am not convinced that the use of man as a generic always constitutes an instance of sexist language. Consequently, in this paper I argue that while great care should be exercised when using man and compounded forms of that word, there should not be an absolute ban or proscription against its generic use.

I understand that many if not most attempts in the past to use the word generically have resulted in some ambiguity or even in ~~outright~~ overtly sexist implications. But though the generic use of the term may sometimes strike us as "literary and proverbial rather than colloquial," its generic use is not so thoroughly vitiated as to demand proscription. I further hold that since the problems associated with this word stem primarily from its misuse in context rather than any inherent sexism in the word itself, lingering sexist "associations" that have accumulated around the proper generic use of the term can best be eliminated through a policy that insists on careful, discreet, and precise use of the word. Speakers should have due regard to the sensitivities of particular audiences which may be offended by certain usages; ~~which~~ for some have been criticized so heavily by those who hold that any use

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of the word as a generic to be obsolete, that these usages seem incapable of rehabilitation at the present time. The use of "Madame Chairman" before this convention, for example, would appear to be indiscreet, though it is a phrase that clearly attests to the fact that the set of chairmen includes women.

I used the word rehabilitation deliberately. Perhaps it is possible to speak metaphorically of the generic use of man as if it were sick, plagued and debilitated by persistent ambiguity and sexist usage patterns. But what should we do with a sick word? Kill it off for mercy's sake? Write it out of the dictionary, the handbook, the thesaurus? Forbid it ever to be uttered at future CCC Conventions? No. I hope that we can see our way clear to warn people against its improper use; to admonish users of its potentially sexist implications in many constructions; but to permit its careful and unambiguous use in contexts where it does not serve to eliminate women from view; and especially, it should be permitted in contexts where speakers go out of their way to make women visible, that is, by using the word or its compounds in sentences and paragraphs ~~that make~~ This can be done explicit the fact that man, in the "abstract or generic sense," especially without a definite or indefinite article, refers to males and females collectively.

If the word sounds funny or peculiar or seems laden with sexist implications in the following example, we must ask ourselves, why should it?

> Archeologists announced today that they have discovered evidence of man's existence as far back as 3,000,000 years ago, based on the dating of a woman's skeleton. (Radio news report, Knoxville, April 1975; cited by Julia Stanley, "Gender Marking in American English," Sexism and Language, p. 57)

Julia Stanley, from whom I borrow this example, comments that in it "The explicit semantic contrast introduced by the use of woman makes the attempt to interpret man as a generic impossible, and even humorous" ("Gender Marking...," Sexism and Language, p. 57). If it is humorous, the humorousness

perhaps derives as much from our guilty awareness of our own set of sexist associations as it does from our awareness that the word man in English is used most frequently to speak of males. For certainly the usage above makes strict logical and etymylogical sense. If it is inherently funny or impossible to say that "man was created male and female," then perhaps it is inherently funny and impossible that the approved word for adult female human should be woman, as this word is derived from the compounding of wif and the generic man. I note this in passing because in a recent article in Iowa English Bulletin, Julia Stanley spells the word w-o-m-o-n in the singular and w-i-m-m-i-n in the pulural (though she does not comment on this spelling in the text and does not spell the word this way in other articles). I wonder also if even the word woman be tainted, what about the recommended alternative, human?

Though man as a generic may be frequently ill-used, let us hope that its generic sense is not terminally ill, but that it can be rehabilitated. We shouldn't have to kill it off; and perhaps we are not necessarily obligated to murder it with editorial pencils in order to remain within the NCTE Guidelines. Listen to the first item listed there:

> Although man in its original sense carried the dual meaning of adult human and adult male, its meaning has come to be so closely identified with adult male that the generic use of man and other words with masculine markers should be avoided whenever possible.

The wording here does not seem to necessitate an absolute ban; we are simply asked to avoid man "whenever possible." This wording permits some latitude, depending on your views on the issue of synonymy; "whenever possible" to some might mean "never" and to others "always." But the guideline probably allows some exercise of judgment, while it conveys the impression that in most cases serviceable alternatives can be found for generic man.

But while the NCTE Guidelines, in my reading of them, at least, appear to permit individual writers and editors some discretion, we have already heard how some commentators on this problem have not been so tolerant. In a frequently cited article, for example, Kate Swift and Casey Miller contend that "As much as any other factor in our language, the ambiguous meaning of man serves to deny women recognition as people" ("One Small Step for Genkind," New York Times Magazine (April 16, 1972), p. 106). The authors suggest that their own coinages, gen and genkind, be placed in circulation to replace the offending man and mankind, which would subsquently be used only with reference to males. Also notice that The Guidelines for Nonsexist Use of Language prepared by the American Psychological Association, while they do not offer any neologisms, do seem to suggest a ban:

> The author should avoid use of the terms man or mankind and instead use human, human being, humankind, people, persons, or the like. (American Psychologist (June 1975), 682-684; this quote from p. 683)

Few articles which call for a ban on the use of man use dictionaries in their effort to demonstrate that the generic sense of man is obsolete, assuming that dictionaries do not always reveal the language as it is spoken or even that dictionaries are mainly compiled by males who reveal their sexist biases in their definitions of man as a generic. Most critics of generic man offer evidence based on usage patterns, and some even offer empirical evidence that man does not carry the generic meaning that most dictionaries ascribe to it. The most often cited study of this sort seems to be Schneider and Hacker, "Sex Role Imagery and the Use of Generic 'Man' in Introductory Texts: A Case in the Sociology of Sociology," published in The American Sociologist in 1973. It was their hypothesis that

> /man/, contrary to its formal definition, is not in fact interpreted to mean "people" or "human beings," but rather cues students to think "male." (p. 12)

They tested the hypothesis by asking college students

> to select pictures they would use to represent chapters in an introductory sociology textbook. To measure the possible effect of the generic term, two forms were used. One presented some of the chapter titles containing the generic term, the other used comparable substantive labels without the "man" term. (pp. 13-14)

For example, on one form, five out of thirteen headings were phrases such as "Social Man," "Urban Man," and "Political Man." The other form used only non-"man" labels, such as "Society," "Urban Life," and "Political Behavior." The experiment shows, claim the authors, that

> for a significantly large number of students, the generic "man" is not, apparently, generically interpreted. Among all respondents, about 64 percent of those students receiving non "man"-linked labels submitted pictures containing males only, whereas only about half of those receiving lables without the term submitted male only pictures for the five labels. (p. 14)

But I would like to call attention to the variation shown within each set of terms on the two forms, discounting the presence or absence of the word man. When we look at the data tables this way, we find much wider variation between given terms than the overall 14% variance between man-linked and non-man labels. For example, one table shows that "Political Man" elicited male-only pictures from 77 percent of the subjects, while "Social Man" elicited only 16 percent--a gap of 51 points. On the same table, "Industrial Man" received 83 percent male only pictures against the 16 percent figure for "Social Man"--a gap of 67 points; many similar variations are notable. What this study also shows, then, is that responses varied radically according to factors that have nothing to do with the presence or absence of the word man. Removing the man from chapter titles seems to have no effect on the variance between different non-man labels, such as "Industrial Life" (88 percent male only pictures) and "Society" (19 percent male only pictures, a gap of 69 points).

Another study by Wendy Martyna titled "What Does 'He' Mean?," published in 1978, tends to support what I noted above about the Schneider and Hacker data. That is, Martyna's work with information based on experiments and

interviews involving forty Stanford University students, shows that her subjects tended to associate male imagery with many occupational titles and also with supposedly sex-neutral or generic terms. Martyna asked her subjects to complete fragmentary sentences in order to see what pronouns they might use; for example, a student might be asked to complete such sentences as "When an engineer makes an error in calculation . . . ." She also asked students to write down what sort of imagery they had associated with the key terms in the sentences they completed. Did they associate "engineer" with male imagery? She had some sentences that used some of the words suggested as non-sexist alternatives for generic man in the NCTE Guidelines. She says that she "expected little imagery to be generated, since subjects such as 'human being' and 'person' are certainly less concrete than 'nurse' or 'police officer,' . . . . Instead, 60 percent of the men reported that they did receive imagery in response to neutral sentences; while only 10 percent of the women reported such imagery. Moreover, the imagery reported by women, as well as by men, was overwhelmingly male-related" (Wendy Martyna, "What Does 'He' Mean?" Jr. of Communication, 28, No. 1 (Winter 1978), p. 136). So I conclude from this that removing all man words from the language and replacing them with some of the supposedly neutral alternatives listed in our Guidelines, assuming this could be done instantly and completely, might not of itself do anything to make women more visible.

Another 1978 study is that of Barbara Bate, in which she examines the usage habits and preferences of twenty carefully selected faculty members at the University of Oregon. Bate found that in response to "fifteen different terms related to the word 'man' and its alternatives," the subjects demonstrated no clear consensus: "This aspect of language change," that is, the controversial substitutions for generic man, "has brought

confusion, emotion, and wide disagreement." Her study reveals no general feeling that man terms are necessarily sexist. She summarized her findings on this matter by saying that

> The majority of university faculty interviewed in this study were not convinced that terms like 'chairman' and 'mankind' are sexist. But the women most active in the women's movement saw 'chairman' and similar terms as likely to limit opportunities and affect self concepts. Comments about this set of terms revealed that many of the speakers saw themselves as in transition about the terms. (Barbara Bate, "Nonsexist Language Use in Transition," Jr. of Communication, 28, no. 1 (Winter 1978), 146-147)

Bate was trying to show that contrary to the hypothesis of Robin Lakoff, "generic terms are being changed by some individuals" (p. 139). Yet her study does not show that there has already been a general shift away from the generic use of man words; nor does her study reveal any broad consensus on what sort of changes ought to be made in the use of these words.

What I have been attempting to show by referring to these studies is that it has not been empirically established that the word man itself is responsible for causing an overwhelming majority of English speakers to think male. In the Schneider and Hacker study, there is a 14 percent preponderance of male only pictures chosen to illustrate man-linked labels over non-man labels. But there is also much wider variation than 14 percent between the frequency of male-only pictures elicited, when we consider the variation between the other factors in the study, the male imagery seems more strongly associated with phrases such as "Political Behavior" than it does with phrases like "Social Man." And this observation is supplemented by Martyna's finding that those people who had imagery in response to words like "people" and "person" all recorded male imagery. And then Bate's study showed that in 1976, her selected sample of university faculty did not demonstrate that man linked terms are deemed sexist by most speakers.

Yet in the continuing debate on this issue we still find people who insist that there is absolutely compelling evidence that man is always

sexist. In the December 1978 issue of CCC, for example, Julia Stanley and Susan Robbins Wolfe write in a "Response to William E. Coles, Jr.," that

> To argue in favor of the use of he as a "generic" or man as a generic is, quite simply, an argumentum de ignorantia. . . . Man(and mankind), . . . haven't been generic since Old English . . . . (CCC, XIX (December 1978), 405-406)

They say that in arguing for the use of such terms, Coles is displaying "wilful ignorance," and they find "the most disturbing aspect of (his) ...essay (to be) . . . his evident intention to go on believing that he has a 'right' to an opinion that is clearly and demonstrably false. . . ." Of course, I wish to separate the question of the pronoun he from the question of man; for the meaning of the pronoun is more constrained and invariant than that of the noun. Pronouns only convey a limited range of meanings--gender, number, case; and the masculine gender of he seems to persist regardless of context. But I believe that the context plays a much larger role in the determination of the meaning of man. No doubt everyone would agree that in the following example, man is only a pseudo-generic:

> Man's vital needs include food, water, and access to females. (cited by Wendy Martyna, "What Does 'He' Mean," p. 132)

This is certainly a sexist use of the word since in this context it is a necessary inference that man cannot include females. But consider the following passage from Plato's Symposium:

> First you must learn about the nature of man and the history of it. Formerly, the natural state of man was not what it is now, but quite different. For at first there were three sexes, not two as at present, male and female, but also a third having both together. . . (trans. by W.H.D. Rouse, in Great Dialogues of Plato (New York: NAL, 1956), pp. 85-86)

In this passage man cannot be simply marked as masculine, and it appears to function as a true generic. And if the word can be used once in such a way, cannot it be used more than once this way? And if it can be said to function generically in some contexts, when used properly, we do not need any neologisms to replace the word; nor do we always have to try to think

up alternatives. We need only to admonish people to be careful when they venture to use the word and to avoid questionable uses.

Consider one final example from Henry Adams' Mont St. Michel and Chartres (first published in 1913). In his chapter titled "The Three Queens," Adams attempts to demonstrate that during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in France, women directed the essential force of history; it seems his thesis, in fact, that "the eternal woman" is the essential force in all history. Hence, he has occasion to write this sentence:

> The proper study of mankind is woman, and by common agreement since the time of Adam, it is the most complex and arduous. (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1959, p. 215)

Some might want to criticize even this use of mankind as too ambiguous and potentially sexist. For example, some readers might take him to be saying, "The proper study of males is woman." This reading would seem to be defeated by the larger context of the passage, however. Still Adams has no doubt intentionally created a certain ambiguity since his sentence obviously alludes to Pope's famous line, "The proper study of mankind is man." The dissonance of woman where readers familiar with Pope's line expect to hear man, is a deliberately chosen rhetorical effect. In such a sentence Adams forces us to reform our understanding of what mankind as concept ought to bring to mind. He knows that most of us associate the term with male imagery; and he deliberately summons this stereotypical association to consciousness by a striking use of the word in context. Should we not allow such artful and even anti-sexist use of language? I think we should, and I want to stress that we can only allow authors to reform our habitual associations with a given word by allowing them to continue to use that word.

This is not an issue in which scientific demonstration can settle the case for us once and for all; no empirical study can ever tell us finally what do on this question. For the problem of usage discussed here is a rhetorical problem, and rhetorical problems are those, according to Aristotle, that admit alternative solutions--for no one deliberates about certainties (See the Cooper translation of The Rhetoric, Book I, 1357 (p. 11)). And in the absence of certainty that generic man and its compounds invariably must be sexist, it seems both arrogant and ill-advised to ban these words. Rhetorical man must have the right to the generic word of his or her choice.

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